

The Experience of Gender Non-Conforming Students at LSE

Background

Gender nonconforming people report an alarmingly high rate of discrimination - both interactional and institutional - which has not yet been investigated at LSE. The university setting is a hub for interaction, sometimes with important social meanings, and has a crucial role to play for gender non-conforming students. Establishing the support and promotion of diversity and inclusivity as a core principle of its Ethics Code and a priority of LSE 2030, it is important for LSE to understand how it could be more inclusive for gender non-conforming students.

Literature review

- Gender non-conforming people experience high rates of discrimination. The majority has reported facing institutional discrimination in social institutions and interpersonal discrimination in the form of “daily prejudiced encounters and violence in social interactions”¹.
- In a university setting, students have described “invalidating experiences with classmates, peers, professors, and administrators, barriers in having their gender represented accurately in university databases, lack of uniform institutional support, exclusion from extracurricular gendered activities, and a lack of intersectional representation”².
- In British educational context, the Stonewall group found that 65% of gender non-conforming students had experienced harassment as a result of their gender identity and expression. More than four in five (84%) reported self-harming behaviours, and nearly half (45%) had attempted to take their own life³.
- This discrimination was proven to be an obstacle to students’ learning and positive academic outcomes^{4,5}.

Methodology

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four self-identified gender non-conforming students across undergraduate and postgraduate programs during the 2021-22 academic year. Conversations were held on Zoom and lasted between 30 minutes and an hour.
- The interviews were structured around three pre-selected themes identified in the literature; interactions, facilities, administration and services, but the participants were encouraged to talk about anything they considered relevant to the study.
- The well-being and comfort of students were taken as a priority when conducting the interviews as the issues discussed could relate to personal and/or distressing experiences. This method allowed the participants to mention any topic they considered important, whilst going in depth about their experiences, emotions and recommendations.

Findings

Interactions

Most of the participants recognized that LSE was a supportive community overall. Some teachers or staff were particularly supportive by acknowledging the experiences of gender non-conforming students, through inclusive vocabulary or comments. Especially alarming is that the four participants reported having received comments or queerphobic remarks from other students. As a result, two gender non-conforming students explained masking their gender identity out of fear from certain groups of people on campus. One student reported being manhandled by an LSE staff when trying to use a certain gendered bathroom as the staff had a transphobic expectation of what the student’s gender was. Some involuntary behaviour by staff or peers also had an important impact. Such behaviour can range from the use of certain vocabulary or phrasing, affirming the existence of gender binary, to intrusive questions about one’s gender identity. When recounting these experiences, most of the participants explained that they were the result of a lack of awareness or interest in gender non-conformity from other members of the LSE community.

Pronouns

Three out of four participants have reported recurrent misgendering, which some have highlighted as having an important impact on their comfort and well-being. Most of the participants explained how beneficial it was to have staff sign with their pronouns at the end of emails, on Zoom calls or as they are introducing themselves in person. One student talked about this as giving students the opportunity to disclose their own pronouns, whilst fostering an environment of inclusion and awareness. The role of lanyards was also identified as a useful visual marker.

« **It’s not just about talking about pronouns but it’s about understanding pronouns and where people are coming from** »

Curriculum

The lack of openness and consideration of gender nonconformity in the curriculum has been highlighted both in more quantitative departments and in gender-focused modules. Participants have described the existing modules are disappointing for academic standards, but also as invalidating gender non-conforming students on a daily basis. The teaching staff has a role to play not only in the choice but also in the presentation of content and resources. As one participant explained, the assumption that there is no gender non-conforming student in the class changes how the teachers choose and present their case studies. The problem with the curriculum resides in the lack of queer academic staff, the content of the modules, but also the awareness of teachers in choosing and presenting research. As one student explained: “it’s no longer about any sort of representation, knowledge or exposure, it’s about taking control of that situation, by the professors themselves” to head towards an overall more comfortable environment for gender non-conforming students.

Facilities

All of the participants put a strong emphasis on the gender-neutral toilets on campus. Some recognized that having a gender-neutral bathroom, notably opened in the Marshall Building, played an important role in feeling included on campus. Bathrooms are very important as they work as signaling; when only two genders are represented it is a daily reminder that LSE is an institution which promotes gender binaries. Two main issues have been pinpointed by gender non-conforming students. First, there remains a lack of awareness around the location of gender-neutral bathrooms around campus. Second, some of the gender-neutral toilets are shared with disabled toilets, which carries an important symbolism highlighted by all of the participants. The same problem exists in changing rooms. It is an important issue for gender non-conforming students, as gendered changing rooms can be “very triggering.” Bathrooms and changing rooms were particularly emphasized by the participants as they would be lived as a daily distressing experience. Overall, the campus was found to be comfortable and safe.

LSE services

The lack of services and representation for gender non-conforming students was consensual amongst all of the participants. The general services offered by LSE, such as LSE Life, LSE careers, or Student Counselling Service, are not adapted to the needs of gender non-conforming students. One student interviewed also reported that they would have liked to go to Student Counselling Service if a member of staff was trained/specialized in gender identity issues.

Representation

It was a general feeling amongst the interviewees that gender queerness is not represented enough at LSE. If an issue related to their gender identity was to be raised, three out of four participants reported difficulty in speaking up. They might not be comfortable talking about their gender identity and the felt indifference of LSE toward gender identity made them feel like they would not be listened to or understood.

“There is still a long way to go before the academics and the LSE student body are able to understand and respect non-binary identities.”

Administrative forms

Although the participants mostly felt comfortable disclosing their gender identity in ordinary administrative forms, they were hesitant when financial or professional stakes were involved. One student explained not knowing whether the staff handling their issue would undervalue them for disclosing their gender identity.

Recommendations

- **Raise awareness of gender identity for all students and staff**
- **Create services adapted to gender non-conforming students**
 - Encourage staff from all services to acknowledge gender non-conforming students and adapt their support accordingly
 - Include more programs in LSE Careers and LSE Life for gender non-conforming students, such as genderqueer alumni advises/meetings, not only during the LGBTQIA+ month
 - Train or hire Counsellors in the LSE Student Counselling Service on gender identities and include gender identity in the Peer Supporter’s training
 - Create an LGBTQIA+ groups and workshop in the Student Counselling Service, based on the success of a previous informal one created at LSE
 - Communicate about these services effectively, by including them in the Student Handbook, emails or by teaching staff and student representatives about them
- **Make LSE facilities more inclusive**
 - Create gender-neutral toilets and gender-neutral changing rooms
 - Create or dedicate a genderqueer friendly space for students to help foster a sense of community and security for gender non-conforming students
- **Promote genderqueer representation, activities and staff**
- **Modernize the curriculum**
 - Review the curriculums of gender-related courses in light of gender identity which is essential to the understanding of these modules Include more queer authors
 - When possible replace outdated studies which reinforce gender binaries, or train teaching staff to address those studies in a more inclusive way
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- **Further reflections**
 - The inclusion of gender non-conforming students refers to a broader issue of gendered and queer discrimination which cannot be addressed comprehensively through this study but should remain an essential pillar of the development of LSE
 - The scope of this study could not incorporate an intersectional approach which is also necessary to promote inclusivity

References

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